

Nehemiah 5

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Preacher: Billy Joe Calvert

[0 : 00] We are now in the middle of this portion of Nehemiah in which the construction of the walls have begun. The enemies have begun to show themselves and really we're at a really unique time because they are building with one hand and holding a weapon with another hand as we have seen in chapter 4.

There are guards stationed around the walls in various places. Nehemiah is overseeing the work and beside him there is a trumpeter who would sound the alarm if the attack was to begin at that time.

So they believe the attack from without can happen in any moment but they've made preparations and they have been encouraged in the Lord. Remember the Lord our God who is great and awesome Nehemiah had told them. And so they strengthened themselves with the understanding of who the Lord God was and they returned to the work and they are building this great work. Remember in the book of Nehemiah the construction on the wall is so much more than just an economic, political or even a social event. This is the calling of the Lord. This is the work of the Lord because they are building the walls so that the name of the Lord God will be magnified. It has been elevated from something that needs to happen just because things look bad to something that is really being a disrepute to the name of the Lord because they are living in that manner.

[1 : 27] So this is a God called work and a God called labor and we've been seeing over and over again how the enemies attack. In chapter 5 there's a great shift and we'll look at it because we'll see here in this 5th chapter the trouble of internal conflict.

The trouble of internal conflict. It says, Then they were silent and could not find a word to say. Again, I said,

I want you to see. I want you to see from this chapter the trouble of internal conflict. If we were to take a moment and consider which enemy has done the greatest harm to the church throughout the ages.

We would be tempted to look and say, Well, it was this enemy or that enemy or it was this leader or that leader. These people who attacked it or those who did.

[5 : 34] Even today we could say, Well, if we would go to certain portions of the world, even if you would open up Baptist Press today, you would read of still the ongoing slaughter of Christians in parts of the world.

We'd say that's done the greatest harm to the church. But the reality is, is that as long as the enemy is outside the church, the church continues to thrive and continues to grow and continues to be strengthened.

The greatest enemy that has ever come against the church has always been the enemy from within. It is the internal conflict. It is the bickering and fighting.

It is the division that happens among the people of God that has caused the greatest harm to the body. When we know that we are called to a work of the Lord and the enemy begins to be active, it is much easier to guard ourselves and even be prepared for an attack which may come from without.

It is much more difficult to consider one that will come from within. And that is exactly what Nehemiah is facing in this fifth chapter.

[6 : 41] It is the internal conflict that begins as soon as it seems that the enemies on the outside have kind of lightened up a little. It is something that is unexpected.

For just a few days prior to this, everyone was excited and everyone had a mind and a heart to work. We have seen in the third chapter that there are varying groups of individuals, all side by side,

people of different social standing, people of different economic standing, people of different occupations, laboring side by side, men and women and priests and leaders.

But this shouldn't surprise us to come to the fifth chapter and find that there is a great outcry because whenever you put that many people together side by side, eventually something happens. But it is not the enemy that they are guarding themselves against. And I want you to see the trouble of this internal conflict. The first thing that we notice about this, it leads to a demoralized people. Look at what it says. Now there was a great outcry of the people and their wives. That's really telling because in Jewish society, I don't mean this in any disrespect, we're trying to keep it in its context, the wives were often silent.

[8 : 03] And for Nehemiah to note that even the wives were crying out is to say that this had reached really the utmost of levels.

It was not just the husbands who were upset and making their voices heard publicly. The wives were also so upset that their voices were being heard publicly. And the people are demoralized for there is much that is stacked against them.

And don't be surprised that it starts in the home because the enemy's attack internally often, if not always, begins in the home. It is the breakdown of the home that leads to the deconstruction not only of societies but also of churches.

It is the breakdown of the home that leads to the breakdown of the people of the Lord. And it is the home that is interrupted first and foremost within the community of the Jewish people who have put their mind and their heart and their bodies to the work.

So now we have husbands and wives that are upset. And the people are distraught so much so that they cannot hold it in anymore. Really in the passage before us, there are three things that are leading to the demoralized position that they are in.

[9 : 22] The first one is a famine. It says we are looking for food. Me and my family, we are many people and we cannot find enough food. Others are saying I am people just like them. But I have had to sell my land so that I can buy food.

And so the question we would ask is why was there a famine? Well, probably because of the great influx of people that have moved into this land, which has been unprepared, unsewn, and untilled for so many years.

Because Ezra brought back people. Nehemiah brought back people. And now everybody is gathered together. Everybody is inhabiting Jerusalem for the first time. They've been out there. And now they're all in Jerusalem and they're working together on the wall.

And the fields around Jerusalem probably were not sown a year in advance to prepare for this influx of individuals. So food was scarce.

And when people go hungry, people get upset. The second one that we see in the text is that there was the tax from the king.

[10 : 19] Historically, we have it recorded for us that kings of that day, even within the Persian Empire, and most notably within the Persian Empire, were notorious for their excessive tax. While he may have commissioned the building of the temple, don't believe that the king, King Artaxerxes and even other kings that we find kind of intertwined in this from the issuing of the king of Cyrus and then Darius, now King Artaxerxes.

Now King Ahasuerus is in there. And these are not strong believers or even believers. Because if you remember, they commissioned, they said, go rebuild the temple so that they can offer up prayers for me and my sons.

They want to continue their dynasty. Even in the reconstruction of the walls, it was for the benefit of the king. And while God is using them, also, he is using the people and he is exacting a great amount of tax from the people.

And this tax has become suppressive so much so that they're having to sell off their land in order to pay the tax. And then we find the third factor would be the oppression from their fellow countrymen. Some were getting, the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. Those who could afford the tax were also those who could buy the land so that others could pay it. So you have three factors that have led to the demoralization of the people.

[11 : 44] There's a famine, there's a tax, and then there's the oppression from their own countrymen. And no wonder they begin to get a little distraught about their circumstances.

By the way, how hard is it when your life is not going as you think it should, how hard is it to stay focused on the work God has called you to do?

How easily it is that when we have self-concern that the very first thing we stop is the work we've been called for the sake of the kingdom.

We will be in the gospel of Matthew Sunday morning. We'll be in the 10th chapter. We will continue making our way to the 10th chapter. We will meet an individual that is recorded in all the synoptic gospels.

You know him as the rich young ruler. How hard it was for the rich young ruler. When he has self-concern. Because that's the major problem in his life is a concern for self.

[12:47] When there is self-concern to inherit, as he asks, eternal life. Because when things aren't going comfortable at home, then things just normally aren't going.

And it is the internal conflict that begins with demoralized people. Secondly, we see here that one of the troubles with internal conflict is the ignored standard.

There's an ignored standard. Nehemiah says, when I heard these words, I was very angry. By the way, anger is not a sin. Nehemiah says, then I was very angry.

Now, I love what he says next. He says, and I consulted with myself. That's a good way of saying, Chuck Swindoll said, he took a moment to take a deep breath.

He said, I'm angry, Lord. But he didn't speak in anger, right? He did not let anger master him. For he consulted with himself. That is, he searches on heart. Do I have a right to be upset at what I'm upset about?

[13:57] And as I'm angry, am I going to handle this properly? So he took a moment, and he didn't react to the news immediately.

He took a moment to take a deep breath and say, yes, I'm angry. Not angry at those who are demoralized. Not angry at those who have been oppressed.

Not angry at those who are cast down. Because we know who his anger is geared towards because it tells us. Because he called to himself the nobles and the rulers.

He called the leaders, the people who were probably oppressing their fellow countrymen. He called those who were actually doing it to the others.

And he was angry, and he consulted with himself, and then he took action. He took time to let his anger calm down, and he spoke with wisdom. But look at what he says. He says, what you are doing is not right.

[15:03] And he called them to account. He said, you're taking advantage of them. You're using them in ways that you should not. And they had nothing to say. They responded, and the reason they had nothing to say is because the book of Leviticus tells us very clearly in Leviticus chapter 25 that a Jewish individual could lend money to a fellow Jew, but he could not charge interest.

It tells us that if he was in need, that he could give to him, but he could not charge interest. He would expect a repayment of what he gave him, but he could not benefit from what he had lent him. It tells us in the book of Deuteronomy the same principle, that a fellow countryman could not charge interest to their brother or their sister. And if that person, their brother or sister, their fellow countryman, by brother I mean countryman, had become to the point where he had to sell himself into servanthood, it was not slavery because it had an extended period.

There were seven years. He would serve this person for a maximum of seven years, and on the seventh year he had to go free. He could sell him, he was an indentured servant is what he was, if things got so difficult and things got so hard that he could not pay what he needed to pay, then he could indeed give of himself and quite often his family for seven years of service to a fellow countryman and benefit from having his bills paid.

But at the end of seven years, he went back to his land, or at the year of Jubilee, depending upon when the year of Jubilee took place, then he would be free and go back to his land as well.

[16:38] Now it was permissible for a Jewish individual, just so that we understand the Old Testament, to charge interest to a non-Jewish individual. It was permissible for them to do it to a stranger, but they could not do it to a fellow countryman.

Now the question is, why? Why did they do that? Well, and this is where we have to find out the ignored standard, because God said, don't do this.

Treat one another differently than you treat others outside the world. Treat each other differently than the world treats one another. Don't look like everyone else. Because God said that instead of

charging your fellow countrymen interest, lend to those who ask, and trust that I will give you the increase.

See, their riches were supposed to be gained by the favor of the Lord, not their monetary gain from charging interest to one another.

And they were ignoring that. They were living like everyone else around them. They were ignoring the standards of the law.

[17 : 48] This is why, when Nehemiah consulted with himself, he did justify the reality. He has a reason to be upset. He has a reason to call them out. And he does. He does indeed call those out who are living this way.

Now, you have to keep in mind, this is after Ezra has come. Nehemiah comes about 13 years after Ezra. Ezra is the priest who comes to teach them the law.

So the people have heard the law. There's been a great revival. We'll read about that later in the book of Nehemiah, that Ezra had led the people in by this time.

They have heard about these matters. But yet they're ignoring them because it does not benefit them. They ignore the standard because they believe the benefit is greater by acquiring land, perpetual slaves, and even monetary gain by lending money.

Nehemiah, which leads us to the third trouble of this internal conflict. There is a weakened testimony. There's a weakened testimony.

[18 : 54] Look at what it says. He says, The thing which you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?

Nehemiah reminds them, We ought to look different because everybody's watching. The way we treat one another is a testimony to the reality of the Lord God we profess.

And he makes this declaration. We are already being mocked. We're already being ridiculed. We're already being reproached by Samballot, Tobiah, the Ammonites, all the people around them, right? Everybody gathered around them is already mocking us and making fun of us. And now the way you're living gives fuel to the fire because you're living exactly as they are.

You're not living any differently. You're doing the same thing they would do. You're seeing your fellow brothers and countrymen here going to such debt and slavery that they have no gain.

[20 : 03] We can no longer declare that God is showing us favor for you are gaining favor the same way they are. And it weakens the testimony. Sadly, and it has been said over and over again, that sometimes the greatest harm done to the non-believers is the harm of the testimony of the church.

It is the weakened testimony of the church because of internal conflict, because of disputes and bickering and fighting and all the things that go on within the church where others are outside and say, well, if that's the way it is, I don't want anything to do with that.

Even Jesus himself said this. Why? He said that they will know that you love me by your love for one another. He said the testimony you have with one another will be a testimony to the world of the love you have for me.

I'll never forget an image I got read. Max Lucado, I don't endorse much of everything that Max Lucado writes, okay, but there's some of the old stuff that Max Lucado wrote.

It's a really good book called The Grip of Grace and The Grip of Grace, which is, by the way, an astounding book if you've never read it. Let me just give you this unashamed plug.

[21 : 26] If you have, if I can say this, I know we're live streaming, so I'll say this about as good as I can say it. If you have a friend that is wrestling with baptismal regeneration, that is, you have to be baptized to be saved, okay, and if you are trying to witness to someone that is struggling with that, get the book In The Grip of Grace and give it to them.

If you don't have it and you want to get it, come get the one out of my office or read it. And the reason I say that is because Max Lucado pastors a church that adhered to baptismal regeneration for years, and he went through this thing called the Grace Movement in the 1980s where he, as a pastor, came to understand we're not saved by our works, but we're saved by grace.

Now, they still do baptism on the day an individual professes Christ, but how he perceives salvation has completely changed, and that book is really the overflow of what that grace movement.

It's a wonderful book, but he paints this word picture as Max Lucado can only do, and says, in this world of desperation, people are in this sea of sinfulness and sea of misery, and everyone's looking for someone to rescue them.

And he said, but who's going to climb aboard a boat when everybody on the boat is stabbing and fighting and bickering with one another? Because it's the internal conflict that weakens the testimony of the church.

[22 : 57] And it is weakening the testimony here of the people of God in the book of Nehemiah because the nations were watching. So one of the troubles of internal conflict is it weakens our testimony.

Fourth, probably the greatest trouble of internal conflict is it hinders the work. Do you know Nehemiah chapter 5 has no mentioning of any work on the wall?

It's none. In the fifth chapter, the work is completely stopped. In Nehemiah chapter 4, the enemies on the outside, Sambalot, Tobiah, and all the Ammonites and all the other people were saying, hey, we're going to come kill you.

Hey, we're going to attack you. Hey, we're going to come upon you in any moment. You won't know where we'll come. Jews that lived around them came ten times and told them that they were going to be attacked. And yet, they continued to work. They had a shield.

They had swords. They had spears. They had it in their hands. They were going back and forth to the water with all their weapons. But yet, they were laying bricks while working. The enemy's coming at any time. Okay, we're going to keep working.

[24 : 06] We're going to keep working. We're going to keep working. Sambalot's over here mocking them, making fun of them. They keep working. Tobiah says, if even a fox should jump into your wall and fall down, they keep working. And as long as the enemy's out there, everybody keeps working.

But the moment it happened on the inside work stopped. It just did. Everything on the wall stopped. And that's the goal of the enemy. Because the greatest goal of the enemy is not, we've said this before, is not to get us, but to stop us.

An internal conflict causes the work that God has called a body of individuals to do to completely stop. If you ever study churches that die, you will notice that churches that die did not die because everybody in the community forgot about them or everybody in the community started resisting them or everybody in the community began to oppose them.

because usually opposition fuels the church. It gives them a cause to labor for. It gives them something to do. But if you ever study the churches that die, it is when problems started inside the church and they just stopped doing what God called them to do.

[25 : 37] And it hindered the work eventually to the point that everyone just walked away. That's why we praise God for Nehemiah because Nehemiah didn't let it continue.

He called it out. He called it what it was and he did it very quickly. Why? Because if there hadn't been Nehemiah being used of the Lord God there and the people had this great cry and said, this is not right.

We're hungry. You're getting richer. We're getting poorer. You've taken our sons and our daughters and our lands and we have nothing. We're slaves forever. I promise you everybody would have just left. They would have just stopped.

But God had the man Nehemiah there to call it out and to hold them accountable and not only just to call them out but also to call them into covenant with one another because he gathered all the people there and he gave them.

He even brought the priests in. It just became a spiritual matter, right? This was no longer just a financial matter or a political matter. This was a spiritual matter and he brought the priests in and he called it out what it was.

[26 : 42] This is wrong. And they said, yeah, you're right. We shouldn't do this. But even that, I love Nehemiah didn't say, I'm not looking for lip service, right? I'm not looking for you to agree with me that, yeah, that's right.

I mean, we've all seen that when we tell somebody you shouldn't do that. Yeah, I know it's wrong but that really means nothing. Nehemiah says, okay, then let's sign a covenant and we're going to bring the priest in and we're going to make a covenant that this is not going to happen any longer and you're going to give them back the interest.

You're going to give them back. You ever want to see a real good Bible study of this and see a case study in scripture? Go find that wee little man who climbed up in the sycamore tree. You remember him? Zacchaeus. And he was that wee little guy.

But what did he do? When he found Christ, he went and gave all the extra money he had collected back. He gave everything back and he paid extra back and he gave everything away. And he did it because he knew he was wrong.

This is what Nehemiah is calling them to do. And then they say amen. So be it. But notice what they do next. Then they praise the Lord because now they're back in community with one another.

[27 : 49] They're back in unity with each other. And they can praise God for restoring that. But if it had been allowed to fester and to kind of sit around, it would have caused a great divide because it hindered the work.

Five. Number five. Fifth thing. I don't normally give you five, but here's one more. Here's one you'll miss if we're not careful. What is the trouble with internal conflict?

Number five. There's an overlooked example. There's one principle in scripture that we always talk about that God always has his man or woman.

No matter how dark or bleak the situation looks, God always has his man or woman. He's got that person in place. Even in the darkest moments, it seems like the brightest lights are in place to show what God is calling his people to do.

When we look at this chapter and we see all the crying out and all the wrong that is being done and what is going on in the people's lives is they're saying this is wrong and others over here are getting fat off of what they're gaining from their countrymen and everything is kind of seemingly falling apart.

[29 : 05] What we miss is the same thing the people miss and it is there was a great example living among them the entire time. Do you notice Nehemiah says me and my brothers and my servants we're lending them money too.

See it's not wrong to lend them money. He said I know that they're in need so we're lending them money we're not charging them interest. I haven't bought any fields but I'm helping them out.

And so Nehemiah is setting an example that this is how you care for your brother or your sister. He said they're in need and I have an opportunity to help them out so we're lending them money but I'm not neglecting the work I'm not making a big show of it right.

He said but I've committed myself to the work but we also see the example he said I'm also not only am I giving of mine I'm also not receiving what is due me.

For 12 years he's the governor and for 12 years he never received the governor's allowance. Why? Because he said the servitude upon the people was enough.

[30 : 16] What was being expected during the famine and the taxes and everything else that is going on was enough. It was his due but he willingly gave it up.

He said I didn't take what was allotted to me and he didn't take what was allotted to him but he continued not only to lend money but to feed. Look at the people he lists that sat around his table 150 Jews and look at the spread of food that's out there each and every day the ox and all the sheep and the birds and then every tenth day all the wine and abundance the feast that is putting on daily for Nehemiah his brothers his men that are with him and the other people within the town but then also notice there's this one other principle not to count those from the nations around us. Nations the people because they were living among non-Jewish nations Nehemiah said represented from the nations set around his table so you notice here look at this example Nehemiah is not only blessing his fellow countrymen he is a blessing to the nations that sounds a lot like the covenant God gave Abraham right that he would be a blessing to the nations and that's what the Jewish people were supposed to be because they were in covenant a covenant relationship with the Lord God Almighty and God's blessings were to reign through them as they blessed the nations and the nations are gathered around Nehemiah's table and he's feeding them at no charge and his testimony is not weakened and the reason by the way Nehemiah could have such boldness in confronting those who were doing wrong is because in his life he was doing right if we want to have boldness of confrontation which by the way and Carrie has reminded me of this time and time again confrontation is not a bad word we think it's a bad word she told me one time she said have you ever looked it up you know what it means

I said no it just means to confront she said no confrontation means to stand face to face nothing bad in that but boldness to confront is empowered by a life that has been lived well and Nehemiah has been setting the example therefore he had no shame in calling someone else out because his life matches what he is expecting from others and if we want to be those who deal with internal conflict then we cannot be those who stir on internal conflict we have to be those who are living

exemplary lives not perfect we know Nehemiah is not perfect we know it because he's a man just like us but yet he is living exemplary at this matter and therefore he is the example set before them as to how they ought to model their lives and so he could call them out in the moment when the work was hindered often the trouble of internal conflict continues to remain because there are none that are there who have lived in such a manner that they can reconcile or call out the wrong that is being done but Nehemiah was that man thankfully the Lord restores and the people get back to work by the time we go to the sixth chapter the enemy on the outside gets active again but we're not so concerned about the external enemy because very seldom does the external enemy stop the work of God the greatest enemy is that which lies within and here the internal conflict stopped it for a moment but God had his man in Nehemiah to call them out of it and we see it in Nehemiah chapter 5 thank you brother okay does everyone have a copy of the prayer list anyone need a copy as well